

Fern's Story

I meet Fern in a juice bar in Old Pasadena. For about five minutes it's a nice place to talk. Then the lunch crowd comes in, and the blenders whir nonstop for the next hour and a half.

Right off the bat, I get enough information from Fern to keep me off balance for our entire meeting. I didn't expect the director of the Southern California Chapter of the American Indian Movement to be a grandmother, for one thing.

For another, the angles of her face make me think of Sophia Loren, pared down to the essentials of skin, bone and sinew. Her short dark hair is stylish, and her earrings dance almost to her shoulders. She's wearing a faded t-shirt that shows the profile of a dignified Indian on one side and cartoon Indian mascots of sports teams on the other.

We sit knee to knee at our small table and sip fruit drinks through straws. We lean close to each other's ear when we speak, as if we're friends. But it seems to me that Fern doesn't like me much, and sometimes I don't like her.

Most of the time she radiates a fierce energy. She throws out accusations, one after the other, of crimes white people have committed against Indians for hundreds of years. She pauses after each one until she is certain that I have absorbed my share of the blame.

Indians are still paying for what happened to them, as Fern says, and for what is happening to them still.

"We are stepped on by white people," she says. "They treat us like we have no feelings."

"White people don't like to see dark-skinned people get ahead. They just don't want to see anyone looking better than they do."

"White people write the history books. They protect big business. They run the schools and make the movies. They make a lot of laws, but they don't abide by them."

After our meeting, I feel as if I've been beaten up. Maybe this is what Fern feels like, all the time. I decide to see if there's a record of anything she's told me.

There is.

In the 1800s, as American colonists swept farther and farther west, an American newspaper editor named John Louis O'Sullivan wrote a column using the term "manifest destiny." It claimed that it was God's will for Americans to spread out across the continent and legitimized the slaughter of natives who didn't get out of their way.

The colonists gave blankets infected with smallpox to the natives, and governments paid a bounty for each one who was killed.

"They felt we weren't human," Fern says. "They thought we were animals because we lived with the earth."

The dehumanization and hate speech came from the top.

In 1779, George Washington wrote to Major General John Sullivan, "The expedition you are appointed to command is to be directed against the hostile tribes of the six nations of Indians, with their associates and adherents. The immediate objects are the total destruction and

devastation of their settlements and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more."

In 1833, President Andrew Jackson said of Indians, "They have neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire of improvement which are essential to any favorable change in their condition. Established in the midst of another and a superior race, and without appreciating the causes of their inferiority or seeking to control them, they must necessarily yield to the force of circumstances and ere long disappear."

In 1889, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote in *The Winning of the West*, "The settler and pioneer have at bottom had justice on their side; this great continent could not have been kept as nothing but a game preserve for squalid savages."

Dr. Doug Linder, a law professor at the University of Kansas, researched one of the conflicts Fern told me about: The Dakota Conflict of 1862, which resulted in the largest mass execution in American history.

"The Americans called it an Indian uprising," Fern says. "But my people were protecting their land. They were starving to death."

The Right Reverend Henry B. Whipple, the bishop of the territory, which became Minnesota, watched with frustration and anger as it happened. "I had feared an outbreak," he wrote. "Again and again I had said publicly that as certain as any fact of human history, a nation which sowed robbery would reap a harvest of blood."

By 1862, the American government had been buying Dakota land for decades and forcing the tribes onto smaller and smaller reservations. That the tribes had to be coerced into selling their land just showed that they were unworthy of remaining on it.

While the government usually made the down payments, often the installment payments were late, or short, or not made at all. The government also usually committed to sending provisions to compensate the Dakota for no longer having land for hunting and growing crops. These provisions also often arrived late or not at all. When this happened, American traders usually sold the Dakota food on credit, charging them four times what it was worth.

This was part of President Jackson's Indian Removal policy: to use government trading posts to drive Indians into debt and force them to give up land to pay their bills.

In the summer of 1862, the payments were late again. At first, the traders sold the Dakota food on credit, again charging them four times what it was worth. Then they refused to give them more credit, although the Dakota were starving.

At a meeting, Andrew Myrick, the spokesman for the traders, said: "So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry, let them eat grass."

Fern has already told me the end of that story. He was found with grass in his mouth.

The Dakota, except for most of the two bands that had converted to Christianity, attacked colonists and federal troops. Thirty-seven days later, they lost the battle. The conflict had claimed the lives of sixty Dakota and about five Americans.

American troops took 2,000 Dakota men, women and children into custody. Hundreds were imprisoned for three years. Almost one third, including Chief Cloud Man, one of Fern's ancestors, died because of the poor conditions.

Fern's great-grandfather, the warrior Many Lightnings, had married one of Chief Cloud Man's granddaughters. He also was imprisoned.

Many Lightnings let the missionaries in the prison teach him how to read and write, and converted to Christianity.

Most missionaries believed that Indians could become equal to white men only if they became Christian, Fern says. They converted adults and took children as young as five years old from their parents to live in government-funded, often church-run, boarding schools to convert them. People who converted were rarely able to integrate back into their communities when they were released.

"They used churches to kill us off," Fern says. "It was all done in the name of Christianity. If Jesus was here today, he'd be very upset."

A military commission conducted the trials of 393 Dakota in six weeks. On the last day alone, it heard and decided nearly 40 cases. In all, 303 were sentenced to be hanged.

President Lincoln allowed 39 of the executions to go ahead, making it the largest mass execution in American history. Many Lightnings, now Jacob Eastman, was freed.

The government began removing the Dakota from the territory. More than one thousand died of disease and starvation. Records tell of mothers picking kernels of grain out of the dung of the American soldiers' horses to feed their children.

In 1887, the Dawes Severalty Act helped destroy the cultural identity of the Indians and ultimately reduced Indian lands by close to ninety million acres.

The act authorized the government to subdivide tribal land into allotments, which it distributed to individual Indians who qualified for them. Those who paid for allotments received better land than those who didn't, but they had to renounce their ties to their tribe and become American citizens. The ones who didn't qualify for an allotment became landless.

By eliminating tribal governments and communal land ownership, the act broke the Indians' social bonds, estranged them from their traditions and devastated their system of government and their entire social structure.

Many Lightnings bought 160 acres of farmland for fourteen dollars and sent his son John to a Christian mission school for native children two miles away. John's son Charles became a physician and author, and was active in national politics, especially in matters dealing with Indian rights.

In 1890, the last battle between the government and the Dakota took place at Wounded Knee, on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The government had signed a treaty in 1868 with a collective of Sioux bands, including the Dakota. It recognized the Black Hills in South Dakota as a reservation set aside for the exclusive use of the Sioux people.

The government broke the treaty when gold was discovered. Fighting broke out between the Indians and the army in a battle that came to have three names: the Battle of Wounded Knee,

the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and Custer's Last Stand. The army massacred 200 men, women and children.

Many Lightnings' grandson Charles was the only physician there. He had been the doctor at Pine Ridge for two months.

Fern grew up on her father's farm in South Dakota. In 1953, she moved to Los Angeles. Congress had just passed a resolution, which the Dakota refer to as a "sell or starve" policy, disbanding tribes and relocating Indians into urban areas.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs gave her \$90 and train fare to Los Angeles and found her a place to live. In 1970, she helped found the San Jose chapter of the American Indian Movement.

"AIM was founded to stand up for Indians' civil rights," Fern says. "To give Indians hope, courage, self-respect, responsibility and power. People call us gun-toting militants. We say what we want to say. We don't owe anybody anything. They think we're crazy because we stand up against the odds. But how can you take a beating over and over? You couldn't be proud of yourself. What would it mean to future generations?"

Not all Indians support AIM. "You need good guys to have a relationship with the government," Fern says. "But you also need bad guys to be the instigators, to get the work done."

In 1973, two hundred Dakota took over the village of Wounded Knee for 71 days, more than eighty years after the massacre took place there. One of their goals was to get the government to recognize the broken 1868 treaty that recognized the Black Hills as Sioux territory.

Fern was there, as a reporter. "We had to get the media's attention so the world would know what was happening," she says. "I saw people standing up. They had phony guns in their hands -- most of them were wooden. It made me proud to be an Indian."

The treaty still isn't settled, but the treatment of Indians has improved somewhat. As a result, the work of the American Indian Movement has evolved.

"At first we had to stand up with our bodies," Fern says. "We couldn't get an education. We had no money, no schools, no resources."

Today AIM hires lawyers to ensure that federal and state governments honor their treaties. They publish a quarterly magazine which is distributed in North America and England. Members travel across the country on lecture and book tours.

"We want more money for education and textbooks that tell the truth about American history," Fern says. "Children should grow up knowing the truth about Manifest Destiny."

Indians are still under attack economically and culturally, she says. Pharmaceutical companies sell Indian herbs and medicines, but they don't share the profits with Indians.

Archeologists carry away ancient Indian bones and artifacts. "How would you like it if people dug up your ancestors, made money studying them and then left them in the basement of some museum?" Fern asks.

Because of intermarriage between Indians and white people, millions of Caucasian-looking Americans proudly claim Indian blood. It's ironic, when Indians are so looked down upon, Fern

says. "Every day I get a call from someone who has just discovered an Indian ancestor. All they want is money."

And when you see people with Indian names, watch out, she says, "They're usually phony. We use Indian names in private and in ceremonies. We all have English-sounding names."

Then she pulls the front of her t-shirt out so I can get a good look at the cartoon Indian mascots on it.

"The teams say they're honoring us," Fern says. "They're either stupid or they think we're stupid. It's not for you to decide how to honor us. It's for us to tell you what we want to honor us. Ultimately, it's about respect."

But when she is the most frustrated, a very funny dark sense of humor comes through.

"My grandson goes to a high school near here," she says. "Their team is the Apaches."

She shakes her head, but she can't help smiling. "It's tough to be an Indian."